

# PLENTY OF ROOM

MOTEL

Not once has she come through the door to find the bed turned down and a mint resting on her pillow, but **PHOTOGRAPHER HEATHER SAITZ** remains enchanted by mid-century motels. The proof is on display beginning tonight as part of Exposure 2013. [by Jacquie Moore](#)

She can't be certain, but photographer Heather Saitz's obsession with mid-century motels may have begun the moment her dad made a fateful decision that fathers who subscribe to a tougher, you-ain't-made-of-sugar brand of parenting wouldn't have made. En route to a camping trip on a miserably wet New Brunswick weekend when the photographer was eight years old, her dad bypassed the campground in favour of the nearest motel down the highway ("Cable TV!" "Hot Showers!" "In-Room Coffee-Maker!"). Almost three decades later, Saitz is still wildly in love with "the nostalgia, the esthetic and the idea of simpler times" that these iconic motor inns represent to her.

Of course, the history of the motel extends back further than Saitz's childhood experiences. The popularity of "motor hotels" was tied to the boom in highway travel in North America in the 1920s; travellers wanted cheap, easy-to-access accommodations. The word "motel"—a contraction—was coined by the owner of California's 1925 Milestone Motor Hotel, who couldn't fit all the letters in that name on the roof of his establishment. The popularity of this casual, affordable, drive-up form of lodging peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, and began to decline soon after as budget chain hotels took hold. (It's hard to imagine ever feeling nostalgic for an old Super 8 Hotel.)

While Saitz has been shooting pictures of mom-and-pop motels across the country for many years, it was two summers ago that the Calgary photographer consciously set out to document those establishments whose days in the sun were long over—places like Quebec's now abandoned Francoeur Motel, which died of loneliness when the new Trans-Canada highway passed it by, and Niagara Falls' Cadillac Motel, which surely saw its share of lovesick honeymooners in the 1960s but now appeals to low-budget travellers for whom advertised amenities such as "Microwave" and "Cheap Rates" are essential (with a rate of \$59 for a room in peak season, it's no wonder the wood panelling is vintage).

In shooting this beloved material for her third solo exhibition, titled *Rooms for Tourists*, Saitz found that budget vacation rentals appear to be thriving most robustly in B.C. where, she says, "motels in the Okanagan and the Interior seem to be experiencing a revival—or perhaps these establishments never had a chance to fade into obscurity given their location within family-oriented tourist meccas." In Penticton, for instance, she found the sort of lovingly shabby je ne sais quoi she was after at places like the Stardust Motel, El Rancho Motor Hotel, Tiki Shores Resort and the Bowmont, where "the mid-century motel's legacy is alive and well."

Long live the motel. May we always find cheap, welcoming digs along the highway to give us shelter from the rain just when we need it.

## Au Vieux Fanal, Rivière-du-Loup, Que.

Saitz found this motel on the Internet last summer and, within weeks, was on a flight to see it for herself. From Moncton, Saitz and her boyfriend drove the scenic route to Rivière-du-Loup, "a small, postcard-perfect Quebec town, nestled on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River." While checking them in, the owner told the couple that they'd missed a huge storm the day before, and that the weather was still highly volatile due to Hurricane Leslie passing through the Maritimes.